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# INTERPRETATIONS OF THE TOWER OF BABEL NARRATIVE IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

## ABSTRACT

Biblical scholarship from the African context provides possible new and creative perspectives for the interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative because of uniquely African questions that structure the interpretative process. These unique questions relate to the cultures of African people, the injustice of colonialism, apartheid and so forth. The problem is that some of these new perspectives are influenced by rationalism that may result in reductionist interpretations of the Tower of Babel narrative. This is clear in the African cultural hermeneutics of Solomon Avotri and Black African hermeneutics of emeritus arch-bishop Desmond Tutu. The contemporary move among some biblical scholars from the African context that focus on the interaction between scholarly and non-scholarly interpreters of the Bible is an attempt to address the problems associated with rationalism. The art of Azaria Mbatha will be used to illustrate the potential of this contemporary move.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Biblical scholarship from the African context<sup>1</sup> provides the possibility of new and creative perspectives for the interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative<sup>2</sup> because of unique questions that people from the African context ask when interpreting the Bible. These unique questions relate to the cultures of African people (that are mostly holistic), the injustice of

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- 1 Biblical scholarship from the African context is understood as a heuristic reference to the diversity of interpretations of the Bible by scholars in the African context. These interpretations reflect the unique questions that arise from the experiences of African people.
  - 2 The Tower of Babel narrative refers to Genesis 11:1-9. Where applicable the New International Version of the Bible is used in this article.

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colonialism, apartheid and so forth. The problem is that some of these new perspectives are influenced by rationalism<sup>3</sup> that may result in reductionist<sup>4</sup> interpretations of the Tower of Babel narrative. The influence of rationalism on scholarship from the African context is probably rooted in the rational underpinning of modern scholarly training. Rationalism is reflected in the systematic questions that constitute theories and methodologies of interpretation (Said 1994; Taylor 2003:1-13). This process of systematic structuring may lead to reductionism because it reduces reality and frames a particular aspect of reality. The rational system is constructed by the formation of a logical connection between aspects of reality that are aligned to a particular ontology. Thus, limiting, neglecting and silencing aspects of reality that do not fit into the logical system (Dube 1996:115; West 1999:12). The implication is that rationalism in scholarship may collude with oppressive views that can seriously undermine the ethical responsibility of biblical scholars by means of exclusion (Schüssler-Fiorenza 1988:14, Dube 2002:55). The influence of rationalism is clear from the structured questions that modern scholars ask when interpreting the Tower of Babel narrative. This is reflected in the methodologies or systems of questions used by scholars like historical -, structural -, literary -, and post-structural modes of interpretation.

Historical perspectives develop from historical questions that focus on the sources<sup>5</sup> used to construct the text, the literary form<sup>6</sup> and *sitz im leben* of the text. Scholars interpreting the Tower of Babel narrative from this paradigm, like Driver (1909) and Colenso (1863) (from the South African context), focus on issues like the incompatibility between the mythical assertions made in the text regarding the origin of languages and knowledge from modern scientific studies of language. The highly complex rationalistic methods that are used, may reduce the text to a pre-modern artifact that succumbs to the superiority of modern science and rationalism. In other words, the text contains archaic information concerning the origin of language that is viewed as mythical by the modern

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3 Rationalism assumes that reason is the main means to understand reality. In other words, reality is constituted by logical structures.

4 Reductionist refers to the rational elevation of individual aspects of reality. These elevated aspects can be presented as absolutes, thus reducing the complexity of reality to logical structures.

5 Watson (1994:5) notes that a goal of source criticism is to probe behind the biblical text to uncover earlier literary sources. The text is viewed as an aggregate of literary sources.

6 Watson (1994:8) states that form critics view the biblical text as “useful primarily because it contains within it earlier units which can be valuable to those attempting to study the life of early Israel” (Watson 1994:8).

reader. Another aspect is that the text is dissected and fragmented; thus eroding its unity.

Structuralism represents a transformation in scholarship that emphasizes the literary character and the unity of the text. James Muilenburg (Watson 1994:14) challenges biblical scholars to move beyond historical-critical methods by using methodologies that embrace the unity and literary features of the text (Watson, 1994:14). The influence of literary theory enhances the interpretative process by viewing the text as a literary unit with specific literary, stylistic and artistic qualities. This is reflected in the work of Robert Alter (1992) who uses a literary approach to interpret the Bible. In this regard, the focus shifts to the function of the Tower of Babel narrative in the larger context of the pre-history of Israel (Genesis 1-11), the Pentateuch and Old Testament canon (Van Wolde 2000, Westermann 1984). Later, the influence of post-structuralism that focuses on the role of ambiguity and ideology in the interpretative process led to the rise of post-modern perspectives in biblical scholarship.

Post-modernism is critical of the influence of rationalism and emphasizes aspects that may lead to the implosion of the foundations of Western hegemony through irrationality, ethics and subjectivism (Lyon 1999:25). Post-modernism has been transforming modern scholarship by generating a greater awareness of the limits of rationalism, objectivism and value-neutral interpretations of the Tower of Babel narrative. This is reflected in the work of, amongst others, Walter Brueggemann (1982), Mark Brett (2000) and Berquist (1996). Aspects like the plurality of interpretations of texts and the role of ideologies are focus points of these interpretations. Brueggemann (1982:98) focuses on the ambiguity and tension between unity and diversity in the Tower of Babel narrative. Brett (2000:5) highlights the role of Persian imperialism involved in the writing of the narrative. Derrida (1985:221) deconstructs the disillusionment with metaphysics and the absolute truth claims of the narrative by stating that it is a metaphor of "incompletion". The dispersion following the extravagant building project is an example of the implosion of totalitarian constructions. In other words, it reflects the "internal limits of formalization" attempted by the builders of the tower (Derrida 1985:221).

The importance of post-modernism for scholars from the African context is that it also celebrates the role that non-Western cultures and the history of colonialism plays in the development of new interpretative perspectives e.g. post-colonial and cultural hermeneutics (Dube 1996:115, Petersen 2006:5). It is this development that introduces the possibility that the complex questions arising from the African context may provide an alternative to the rationalism of modern scholarship.

The problem is that the modern scholarly training of scholars from Africa may result in the continuation of the influence of rationalism. Thus, in this article the role of rationalism in terms of the interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative by scholars from the African context will be explored. In section two of this article a discussion follows regarding the possible negative impact of rationalism present in African cultural – and Black African hermeneutics. The interpretations of the Tower of Babel narrative by Solomon Avotri and Desmond Tutu are selected as representatives of African cultural and Black African hermeneutics, respectively. In the third section follows a discussion of the contemporary move amongst some biblical scholars from Africa that focus on the interaction between scholarly and non-scholarly interpreters of the Bible. This is an attempt to address the problems associated with rationalism (West 1991, 1991; Dube 1996; Ukpong 2000). It deliberately incorporates the complexity of reality into the interpretative process. Complexity refers to unpredictability and diversity of life. In other words, scholars interpret the text with non-scholarly interpreters in an attempt to incorporate the complex questions that may arise from the African context. The theoretical and methodological training of scholars is used to serve non-scholars so that excluded aspects of reality may emerge. The benefit of this interactive mode of interpretation will be illustrated by engaging the art of Azaria Mbatha. Mbatha's art reflects the complexity of the African experience of reality and serves as a guard against rationalistic reductions.

## 2. THE TOWER OF BABEL NARRATIVE AND THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

### 2.1 African cultural hermeneutics

John Samuel Mbiti's African Theology is a representative of the African cultural hermeneutics. Mbiti interprets the Bible from the different aspects of the cultures of African people (Mbiti 1986). In other words, questions influenced by African religion – myths, wisdom and other cultural aspects – shape the interpretative process (Martey 1993; Ukpong 2000). An early development is that of the comparative method reflected in the work of Joseph John Williams, *Hebrewism of West Africa: from Nile to Niger with the Jews* (1930) (Ukpong 2000:5-6). Later the methodological weakness of the comparative method was improved by comparative religion (Mbiti 1979, 1986). Hereafter the focus shifted to studies of "Africa-in-the-Bible" generally investigating the presence and role of Africa and African peoples in the Bible, as well as their role in the salvation history of Israel (Adamo 2001). These studies also challenge the negative image of Africa

and African peoples of certain racist interpretations of the Bible e.g. the racist connotation between African people and the curse of Ham in Genesis 9:18-27 (Ukpong 2000:7-8). This cultural perspective provides new creative insights informed by the holistic African culture, religion and the experience of colonialism.

The problem of this perspective is that it could become a function of Westernization<sup>7</sup> by reducing the generalized constructions of Africa and Africans into a type of cultural artifact. This perspective does not take into account the complexity and diversity of Africa and its people into consideration. In other words, an aspect of African culture is used as the basis of a rational reconstruction of African culture. Anderson (1991:7-8) notes that this reductionism is present in the anthropology of Mbiti:

Mbiti tends to translate African concepts of man into Western theological terms. According to his view of African peoples, they regard man as consisting of two main parts: the physical and the non-physical, and this, according to him, is a universal belief among all African peoples. Mbiti does not emphasize the essential unity of man in African traditional thought in his attempt to make this acceptable to Western theology.

Another problem is that justice issues are not included in African interpretations from a cultural perspective and cultural aspects are regarded as immune to criticism. The implication is that a reduced reality is used as the basis for the reconstruction of African culture. This reduction is then elevated to a position that is above criticism because the aspects that are excluded fall outside the range of the particular logical reconstruction. An example of this idealistic view of culture is highlighted by Mbiti's (1979:482) *Black Theology*:

African Theology has no interest in colouring God or Christ black, no interest in reading liberation into every text, no interest in telling people to think or act 'black'.... African Theology arises from the joy of the experience of Christian faith, it is not restrictive in concerns, nor is it an ideology. It is concerned with Africa and the problems and joys of Africa.

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7 Anderson (1991:20) writes: "Mbiti, Idowu and Setiloane ... concentrate on 'African Theology' in the narrower religio-cultural sense – which often involves casting traditional African religions within a Western academic and theological framework. Ostensibly, African Theology is an attempt to give African expression to the Christian faith within a theological framework".

In what follows, the interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative by Solomon Avotri, serves as an example of the cultural perspective and the negative impact of rationalism.

### 2.1.1 Solomon Avotri

Solomon Avotri<sup>8</sup> (1999:17) interprets the Tower of Babel narrative by comparing the Tower of Babel and the various African versions of myths about the Blue Bird. The Akan versions of the myth states that long ago people were happy, for *Nyame* (God) dwelt among them and communicated with them face to face. However, one day when the women of the village were pounding a mash with pestles in a mortar, they got annoyed with God who stood nearby watching them. Avotri (1999:17) writes that:

God's presence annoyed them, and they told him to be off; and as he did not take off fast enough to please them, they beat him with their pestles. Then God retired altogether from the world into the sky. Still to this day people say: 'Ah, if it had not been for the women, how happy we would be!'

This incident resulted in God withdrawing from the earth and people in general. The women offended God and this resulted in the disruption of the relationship between God and humanity. Therefore, God sent the Blue Bird to cut the rope that connects heaven and earth, according to the Dinka tradition. From then on people, who used to climb the rope to be young again, according to the Nuer traditions, could no longer reach God (Avotri 1999:17).

The myth about the Blue Bird focuses on the renewal of life in the presence of God and the "power to live" (Avotri 1999:18). It attempts to explain why humanity lost this power and provides the reason for the separation between the divine and human worlds – resulting in the crisis of the alienation and inaccessibility of God (Avotri 1999:18).

Avotri (1999:20) notes that the Tower of Babel narrative is part of the pre-history of Israel – "creation and fall". It is the climax of the cycles of rebellion against God that starts with Eve and the snake, Cain and Abel, and continues to the flood narrative. In Genesis 11:1-9, God is no longer accessible to humankind – it depicts God removed from the earth, "far away in the sky" (Avotri 1999:20).

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8 Solomon Avotri is Associate Professor of Bible at Payne Theological Seminary in the USA. Originally from Ghana, he is now an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church.

The building of the tower and creating a name for themselves is an attempt to establish a connection with God. “For this reason, humanity strives to do for itself what it thinks necessary for its self-preservation (Genesis 11:4a)” (Avotri 1999:20). The desire to create a name for themselves, according to Avotri, is linked to self-preservation through names in Africa (Avotri 1999:21). In Africa, naming rituals secure immortality (Avotri 1999:23). Only through “marriage and childbearing, [people] are still able to achieve something of the original immortality” (Avotri 1999:22-23):

The original paradise was lost: men’s direct link with God was severed or eclipsed, the closeness between the heavens and the earth was replaced by a vast gap without a bridge, the gifts of immortality and resurrection melted away, and death, disease and disharmony came and reigned ever since.

In the Tower of Babel narrative the attempt by people to reach heaven through technological development and their unity threatens God’s supremacy. Thus, God confuses their language and scatters them, because of their rebellious attempt to reach heaven. God did not want them to obtain immortality – create a name for themselves. The dispersion is not punishment for human arrogance or pride. The dispersion is a display of God’s ability to sever the link with human beings – leading to inaccessibility (Avotri 1999:20-21):

And Yahweh said, ‘Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them’ (Genesis 11:6). Following his words with action, Yahweh destroys humanity’s effort and its limitless possibilities of creativity (Genesis 11:7). As a result, the tower never reached heaven, and they never make a name for themselves.

The African Blue Bird myths and the Tower of Babel narrative affirm that God is the God of the sky, who, although much greater than humans, is nevertheless depicted in anthropomorphic terms; God gets angry and impatient (Avotri 1999:22). When humans desire to become immortal it threatens the supremacy of the divine who thwarts their efforts. In other words, God does not hesitate to inflict suffering in order to enhance God’s own well-being. The conclusion of the narrative is that God does not destroy human beings, “God prefers to live in isolation from human beings” (Avotri 1999:22). God remains the creator of life. The negative events that resulted in separation do not lead to the destruction of life.

Avotri’s interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative provides an alternative to that of scholars like Von Rad (1963), Driver (1909) and

Westermann (1984) who argue that the building of the tower was a form of sinful hubris. According to Avotri (1999:22-23) the narrative reflects the complex dynamics of the “divine-human relationship” and the futile attempts to attain immortality. It is an “affirmation of life”. The African Blue Bird myths reflect a yearning for happiness in the midst of the harsh realities of life. As is the case with the Tower of Babel narrative, the myth depicts the deity as the one with power over life and death (Avotri 1999:22-23).

### 2.1.2 The affirmation of life, sexism and reductionism

Avotri's (1999:19) interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative makes it clear that the text is not a negative judgment on humanity but a positive affirmation of the relationship between God and creation. In other words, the focus of the African Blue Bird myths regarding the affirmation of life is one of the main contributions of Avotri's interpretation. Thus, reflecting the positive influence of his cultural perspective on the interpretation of the narrative. This allows a unique contribution to biblical scholarship that generally views the dispersion as the result of sinful hubris.

The problem of African cultural hermeneutics, as mentioned earlier in terms of Mbiti, is the neglect of justice issues and the uncritical stance toward cultures. This attitude is clear in Avotri's silence on the negative portrayal of women, as the sole reason for the separation between God and humanity, in the Akan Blue Bird myth. This is a clear function of rationalism that excluded element that does not form logical connections. In other words, the patriarchal ontology of Africa becomes a point of departure logically connecting elements supporting this perspective. The possible implication of Avotri's analysis of this narrative is that women in general may be portrayed as impulsive and irresponsible.

Another problem associated with rationalism is the reduction of the complex African identity<sup>9</sup> into a superficial unit. Avotri's interpretation borrows from various versions of African myths about the Blue Bird -, Akan -, Dinka - and Nuer traditions. The systemization of these myths in order to provide a coherent scholarly text results in the fact that these myths are reduced to form a coherent unit. This totalitarian construction fails to respect the complexity and diversity of the cultural traditions of Africa.

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9 Fanon (2000:257-258) states that this is a false identity: “The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man ... His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.”

To summarize: It is clear that African cultural hermeneutics do provide a more positive and life affirming interpretation of the narrative than is generally present in scholarship. However, the fact that this perspective falls prey to reductionism under the sway of rationalism results in the perpetuation of injustice e.g. sexism and totalitarianism. In the next section we turn to Black African hermeneutics and the interpretation of the narrative by Desmond Tutu who attempts to address the problems associated with African cultural hermeneutics.

## 2.2 Responding to reductionism in African cultural hermeneutics

### 2.2.1 Black African hermeneutics

Interpretations of the Tower of Babel narrative that respond to reductionism and injustice in African cultural hermeneutics focus on the experience of injustice like colonialism, racism and sexism by African people. This perspective is mostly influenced by Liberation -, Black -, Feminist -, and Post-colonial Theology. Tutu (1979:490) states that African Theology tends to focus on “anthropological concerns”, whereas Black Theology focusses on the “existential urgency” of African people.

The influence of theories and methodologies of modern scholarship is clear in Black African hermeneutics. A distinction can be made between literary and material modes of interpretation. Mosala’s (1989) materialist approach views the text as ideologically laden because it contains inscribed systems of oppression. In order to avert the influence of these ideologies interpretation must take place, according to Mosala (1989:17), from the critical perspective of the experience of injustice. In order to reveal injustice, Marxism and material analysis provide the critical impulse for interpretation<sup>10</sup> (Mosala 1989:17). On the other hand, literary modes highlight the role of the Bible as a critical tool for interpretation. The Bible is the basis of a prophetic approach that condemns injustice. This approach exposes injustice and envisions an alternative future as is the case with the work of Desmond Tutu. In other words, the experience of injustice is interpreted in the light of the Bible (West 1991). The problem of the literary mode is that it can use the Bible in an uncritical way. Loader (1987:11) states:

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10 “For the ‘Word of God’ cannot be the object of criticism. Least of all can the ‘Word of God’ be critiqued in the light of the black experience. The only appropriate response is obedience. At best the black experience can be seen in the light of the ‘Word of God’ but not vice versa.” (Mosala 1986:178).

The work by Dr. Allan Boesak is interesting because it so closely resembles the use of the Bible in the white churches. The authority of the Bible is invoked in order to base the credibility of the theologian's ideas on a trustworthy foundation, but the contextual perspective, which affords the text its meaning, is only covertly present.

It is clear that the theoretical and methodological training of modern scholarship plays a salient role in the Black African hermeneutics. Material analysis and literary criticism form the basis for the construction of systematic questions that frame the interpretation process and reduce reality. Another problem is that the criticism of African culture from the Black African perspective is rooted in rationalism and the notions of liberty, equality and justice associated with the Renaissance and communitarianism. The irony is that both these European developments had a particularly negative view of the cultures and traditions of African people (Said 1994:239). To consider the possible contribution of this perspective and the role of rationalism a discussion of the interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative by Desmond Tutu follows in the next section.

### 2.2.2 Desmond Tutu – *Shalom*

Desmond Tutu's<sup>11</sup> interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative is from the perspective of racism and apartheid in South Africa. He is critical of interpretations of the narrative that justify apartheid by the Dutch Reformed Church in *Human relations and the South African scene in the light of Scripture*<sup>12</sup> (1976). Tutu (1983:39) opens his interpretation of Genesis 11:1-9 by writing:

In this essay I wish to show that apartheid, 'separate development', 'parallel democracy,' or whatever this racist ideology is currently called is evil: totally and without reminder.

In this regard, the focus of his interpretation is prophetic. He rejects apartheid as sinful and provides hope for people experiencing injustice. He focuses on "people who know that they too, despite all appearances to the contrary, are God's children and not His stepchildren" (Tutu 1983:39). The basis for his rejection of apartheid is the fact that the message of the Bible is from the perspective of *shalom*. Tutu (1983:39) states:

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11 Also see Rathbone (2010) for a brief summary of Tutu's interpretation of Genesis 11:1-9.

12 *Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture* (1976). National Book Printers Ltd. Cape Town.

The Bible reveals that God's intention for all His creation and for all humankind is harmony, peace, unity, fellowship, friendship, justice and righteousness – conditions summed up in the almost untranslatable Hebrew word '*shalom*'.

Thus, the Bible must be interpreted from the perspective of *shalom* – peace, unity and equilibrium. Unity is the focus of the Bible and critique of apartheid. Related to this, according to Tutu, is the climax of creation when God creates human beings. The narrative highlights the fact that the most important attribute of human beings is that they are created in the image of God (Tutu 1983:39-40). In other words, because all people are created in the image of God they should live in a state of *shalom*.

Sin corrupts this equilibrium through separation, fragmentation, violence and chaos (Tutu 1983:41). This is the unfortunate state of humanity and creation according to Tutu (1983:40), who states:

The Old Testament proto-history culminates in the fearful story of the Tower of Babel where because of human sin ('hubris'), God confuses men's (*sic*) tongues so that they are unable to communicate (Gen 11:7).

The narrative highlights that sin disturbs the harmony between people. Therefore, reconciliation and atonement is needed for peace and harmony to return to creation (Tutu 1983:40). This sets the scene for the rest of the message of the Bible in which God "goes about repairing the damage that sin caused, restoring the primordial harmony and unity..." (Tutu 1983:40).

In this regard, the question that guides the interpretation of the Bible is how God re-establishes *shalom* (Tutu 1983:40). This is something that will take place during the "Messianic age" when creation returns to the way God intended it to be. This state of creation is reflected in Isaiah 11 – the end of conflict and violence (Tutu 1983:40). It refers to eschatological time – "*Endzeit ist Urzeit*" (The end time is the beginning time) (Tutu 1983:40).

From the above it is clear that Tutu generally follows the same line of argument as modern scholars<sup>13</sup> who view the building of the tower as

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13 Von Rad (1963:147) writes: "What the narrative portrays is something thoroughly primeval; it shows how men in their striving for fame, alliance, and political development set themselves against God. But a punishment befell them. They who were so concerned with unity and alliance now live scattered in a disorder in which they can no longer understand one another". The problem with the reading of Von Rad is that it ends at this point of difference without continuing the argument by accounting for the positive aspects of unity. Tutu follows Westermann's line of argument focusing on the restoration of unity.

rebellion – hubris. In this regard, apartheid is a theological contradiction that is in tension with the focus of the Bible. This tension is due to the fact that apartheid is a systematic restructuring of society based on a state of separation that was caused by sin. In contrast to this the Bible emphasizes *shalom* that celebrates unity, peace and justice (Tutu 1983:40-41). Therefore, unity is the point of departure of the Bible with cultural diversity as secondary aspect. Tutu (1983:42) defines difference only in terms of the religious antithesis (separation between believers and non-believers). Any other form of separation is the result of sin. Thus, Tutu views hubris as the main reasons for the dispersion. The unique contribution of this interpretation is contained in the role of the word *shalom* and the fact that all people are created in the image of God. Unfortunately, *shalom* is rooted in a rationalist reduction of the notion of unity, peace and justice. This will be discussed in the next section.

### 2.2.3 Unity, peace and justice as a rational reconstruction

*Shalom* is a key word in Desmond Tutu's interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative. *Shalom* focuses on the peaceful co-existence of all people. Another aspect is that all people are created in the image of God. Thus, all people are equal and must live in unity and peace. According to Tutu this is the core message of the Bible. In other words, unity, peace and justice are the basis of the systematic questions that frame Tutu's interpretation of the Bible. This is assisted by a literary mode of interpretations that connects individual text. Therefore, the Tower of Babel narrative is linked to the entire salvation history from the Old – to the New Testament. In other words, the set of literary questions results in a limited construction of the text based on the role of unity, peace and justice. This focus on unity, peace and justice is also present in Tutu's use of the word *Ubuntu*<sup>14</sup>. Battle (1996:96) states:

*Ubuntu* is not humanism in the Western sense of favouring Enlightenment notions that truth claims are located in the rational capacities of individuals. The African conceptualization of being human is antithetical to Enlightenment notions, because Western humanism tends more toward materialism than toward an African balance between material and spiritual realities.

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Westermann (1984:556) states that primeval and eschatological time often corresponds in the Old Testament.

- 14 The role of *ubuntu* in the theology of Tutu has led Battle (1996:93) to the conclusion that Tutu has an "*Ubuntu* Theology" or "an absolute dependence on God and neighbour in such a way that the eventuality of human identity is discovered therein" or "*imago Dei* as human interdependence".

Thus, according to Battle (1996:96) the notions of unity and peace reflected in the concept *Ubuntu* may probably provide an alternative to rationalism. In this regard, the interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative of Tutu (from the perspective of *shalom*) contributes to biblical scholarship by highlighting the importance of unity, peace and justice. The problem of Tutu's interpretation and his response to injustice is its close links to Western humanism and rationalism. Although Battle mentions that *Ubuntu* accentuates a "balance between material and spiritual realities" this aspect is not reflected in Tutu's understanding of *shalom*. *Shalom* refers to unity, peace and justice which have more in common with the Renaissance and communitarianism than African religion. Another problem is that in the African context the notion of unity and peace in general do not extend beyond tribal borders with the result that it may perpetuate xenophobia and ethnic conflict.

The positive contribution of Tutu's interpretation is its focus on unity, peace and justice – *shalom*. This, however, may succumb to rationalism and humanism. It seems to reflect the principles of the Renaissance and communitarianism that is placed into an African framework. *Ubuntu* and *shalom* are both deeply spiritual concepts but this is reduced by rationalism to mean something similar to unity, peace and justice associated with communitarianism. This understanding of the culture of African people may become totalitarian and perpetuate cultural imperialism. In other words, it could become a reductionist reconstruction of African culture failing to reflect Africa's diversity or spirituality. In the next section the focus shifts to the interaction between scholarly and non-scholarly interpreters of the Tower of Babel narrative as a response to the negative impact of rationalism.

### 3. SCHOLARSHIP AND THE COMPLEXITY OF REALITY

#### 3.1 The interaction between scholarly and non-scholarly interpreters of the Bible

The interaction between scholarly<sup>15</sup> and non-scholarly<sup>16</sup> interpretations of the Bible is the basis for interpretations that take the complexity of reality

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15 *Scholarly interpretations* refer to the interpretations of trained interpreters of the Bible with theoretical, methodological and analytical skills – attained through Western scholarly institutions shaped by modernism and post-modernism.

16 *Non-scholarly interpretations* are informed by the experiences and questions of flesh-and-blood interpreters of the Bible – the complexity of real life experiences. A distinction exists between the concepts *non-scholarly* and

into consideration in order to resist the move to rational reductions. This interpretative approach is reflected in the work of some scholars from the African context like Gerald West (1991, 1991), Musa Dube (1996, 2002), Ukpong (2000) and so forth. This engagement highlights the importance of careful reflection on the difference between the interpretations of scholars and non-scholars. The implication is that this careful reflection may create greater awareness of the impact of reductionism because interpreters gain exposure to possible new questions that may arise from the African context. Thus, interaction between scholars and non-scholars may enhance the interpretative process because of the introduction of excluded aspects of reality. Ricoeur (1973:113) refers to this process as a *hermeneutical arc*<sup>17</sup> in which pre-critical and critical interpretations engage in the construction of a post-critical interpretation. In other words, the interaction between scholars and non-scholars expands the interpretative process by incorporating the complexity of reality. Phillips and Fewell (1997:2) note that:

... being a good reader of the Bible has very little to do with specialized training and a lot more to do with an informed understanding of the world. 'Ordinary readers'...despite the lack of formal schooling nevertheless bring powerful interpretative skill and rich experience to the reading of texts, biblical or otherwise. 'Tacit knowledge' proves to be every bit as credible and important as the technical skills, graduate programs privilege. Scholars should learn to pay greater attention to such readers and their readings.

The subjective experiences of African people may therefore open new vistas of meaning and knowledge (tacit knowledge). This can be a means to resist the collusion between rationalism and reductionism that can form the basis of oppressive ideologies. These ideologies may collude with

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*ordinary* interpreters. West (1991:161) refers to non-scholarly interpreters as pre-critical or ordinary interpreters. This reflects the modernistic distinction between rational and irrational epistemologies that view non-scholarly interpreters as objects of representation by scholarship – “anthropological” texts (Gloria Kehilwe Plaatjie 2001:36-38). The word non-scholarly is preferred because it reflects the dichotomy between scholarly and non-scholarly interpretations that is, among other things, the result of rationalism and colonial reductions of reality.

- 17 Ricoeur (1973:113) states that “the function of structural analysis is to lead from a surface-semantics ... to a depth semantics ...” He continues to explain that if “we consider structural analysis as a stage – and a necessary one – between naive interpretation and critical interpretation, between a surface-interpretation and a depth-interpretation, then it would be possible to locate explanation and understanding at two different stages of a unique *hermeneutic arc*”.

scholarly education through the uses of theories and methods to reduce reality. Phillips and Fewell (1997:26) states:

In its classic formulations the moment of imperialism is also the moment of education. Imperialism – a system of economic, political, and cultural force that disavows borders in order to extract desirable resources and exploit an alien people – has never strayed far from a field of pedagogical imperatives or what might be called an ideology of instruction.

In other words, the questions that shape these interpretations may be present in the theories and methodologies<sup>18</sup> of modern scholarship. Said (1994:269) writes:

The annals of schools, missions, universities, scholarly societies, hospitals in Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and America are filled with this history, which over time established so-called modernizing trends.

Thus, the complex questions of non-scholars assist scholars in resisting the possibility of injustice associated with cultural imperialism, colonialism and globalization. It moves to a perspective of interpreting the Bible through the eyes of another that affirms. This focuses on a participatory process of interpretation (Segovia 2000; De Wit 1991). Thus, interaction between scholars and non-scholars is a mode of interpreting the Bible that deconstructs the hegemony of imperial educational system. According to Dube (1996) the general positive role of Western scholarship can be enhanced by including *flesh-and-blood* interpreters of the Bible from the African context in the interpretative process. In this way scholarship can be enriched by the realism and complexity of the real life experiences of people from the African context. On the other hand, scholars are challenged to offer their analytical skills to serve the people of Africa by assisting in the recovery of excluded voices. In other words, scholars are challenged to become agents of justice in the African context. Tolbert (1995:351) notes:

Once the extent of one's 'educated' ignorance is acknowledged, the need to listen as carefully and as thoroughly as possible to the perceptions, experiences, and viewpoints of those marginalized or traditionally silenced *before* attempting to act with them or on their behalf is indisputable.

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18 "The so-called critical theories and methods of reading the Bible are thoroughly systematized cultural models of the West. These models are created and sustained by thousands of trained scholars through privileged institutions of financial donors" (Dube & West 1996:12).

The text in the hand of non-scholarly interpreters has the potential to transform and liberate. These interpretations are not mere naïve or pre-modern representation. It is a critical engagement in which the colonized re-interpret the text and construct new stories that “assert the adequacy of their humanity, the reality of global diversity, and their right to independence” (Dube 1996:43).

The danger of this approach is that it could become reductionist, absolute and even oppressive if engagement grinds to a halt. Interpretation may then become dominated by scholars that view non-scholarly interpretations as cultural artifacts, thus, failing to reflect the full dynamic of life in the African context. To avoid this there should be a continuous engagement in which scholarly interpretations are challenged and expanded by non-scholars. On the other hand, to avoid the danger of subjectivism and relativism, scholars have the responsibility to expand non-scholarly interpretations with critical reflections on the text and interpretative process.

In the next section we turn to Azaria Mbatha in order to determine if interaction with his art based on the Tower of Babel narrative can enhance the interpretation process and resist rationalism.

### 3.2 Azaria Mbatha and African spirituality

Azaria Mbatha<sup>19</sup> of Rorke’s Drift<sup>20</sup> bases most of his art on Biblical themes. He also emphasizes the important role of art in resistance readings of the Bible. Nadine Gordimer notes that art was “at the heart of liberation” (De Gruchy 2001:204). Mbatha (Eichel 1986:7) states he hopes that, “in portraying the African experience, I am also expressing the powerlessness and isolation of these people”. He created two artworks based on the Tower of Babel narrative entitled *The Tower of Babel*<sup>21</sup>. The first was in

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19 Azaria Mbatha was born in 1941 in KwaZulu-Natal. He attended Rorke’s Drift between 1962 and 1964. Later, in 1965, he studied art at the Konstfachsolan in Stockholm, Sweden. From 1977 to 1980, he studied social sciences at the University of Lund, Sweden (Eichel 1986:61). His art uses symbols and ideas from the Zulu tradition and culture.

20 The Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre at Rorke’s Drift, was established in 1962. The works of Azaria Mbatha and John Muafangejo are probably the most well known integrating African context and Biblical images in their work. Mbatha produces the most specifically Christian imagery, while Muafangejo’s work, at first religious in content, develops into an explicitly social commentary” (Sacks 1992:346).

21 Also see Rathbone (2010) for a brief summary of Mbatha’s interpretation of Genesis 11:1-9.

1963 and the other in 1979. See Figure 1 *The Tower of Babel* 1963 and 1979.

His 1963 work depicts a tower constructed of many smaller, square shaped huts that form two rows, moving up into the sky. The entrances to the huts are dark, indicating that they are empty with no life in them. At the top of the construction, it splits in two with a figure descending between the two rows of huts splitting. Around the splitting tower, people gather in many different groups. The people are fully clothed in robes. At the bottom of the picture, there are plants with large leaves. The style of the buildings and the clothing of the people reflect that of the people of the Ancient Near East. The people gathering in groups probably refer to the scattering of the people.



Figure 1: The Tower of Babel 1963 (left) and 1979 (right)

In the 1979 picture, the mood is more sombre. The tower has the same construction with empty huts. Compared with the 1963 depiction, of the tower, the difference is that traditional round shaped African huts are used, instead of square buildings. The people are naked, scattered all over and huddled in small groups. Parallel columns penetrate the top of the tower. They symbolize the disruption caused by the scattering and the separation between people. In the fields surrounding the tower, a lonely fully clothed man approaches an ancestor, who is witnessing the destruction of the tower.

The sombre mood of the 1979 depiction reflects the impact of apartheid. The added columns in the 1979 work symbolize separation. The sombre mood and the naked people point to the experience of suffering and dehumanization due to colonial racism. The presence of the ancestor, in the 1979 depiction, highlights the fact that colonial racism did not only disconnect people, but also separated people from the spiritual realm. Racism and separation follow a trace back to the cultural alienation of the people under the lure of the civilizing mission.

The questions that guide Mbatha's interpretation of the Tower of Babel narrative in the 1963 depiction relates to holism and the spirituality of Africa in general. This is reflected in the fact that the people in the linocut are busy working for their ancestors<sup>22</sup> by "carrying wood to prepare a festival for the ancestors" (Eichel 1986:15). But the Tower of Babel narrative depicts human rebellion.

When Man began to aspire to higher things, his simple life no longer satisfied him. He left his simple mud huts behind, gave up his tradition and together with others he built a mighty tower many storeys high. But the tower cracked and broke in two ... The tower is destroyed (Eichel 1986:15).

The result of the rebellion is chaos. "The huts are empty and dead. Humanity is naked and vulnerable, without shelter" (Eichel 1986:15).

The ancestor cult is one of the most prominent aspects of African traditional religion – "the heart of the African spirit world" (Anderson 1991:79). The ancestors constitute the individual's connection to the community. The main function of ancestors is that of protection, but when they are neglected, they unleash destructive powers (Anderson 1991:79). In this regard, Mbatha's art is distinctly different from general scholarly interpretations of the Tower of Babel narrative that are informed by rationalism. Mbatha (Eichel 1986:6), states, "I must show what I see with my soul". In other words, questions relating to the complexity and interconnection of African life inform his interpretation of the narrative.

The 1979 depiction of the Tower of Babel narrative also includes questions relating to African spirituality that is reflected in the presence of ancestors in the linocut. It is also a critique of apartheid and colonialism present in the columns and broken tower. In this regard, not only separation between people and ancestors, but also between people,

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22 The role of ancestors in Mbatha's art does not imply that ancestors are generally part of African Christian life e.g. some representatives of African Christianity are fervently opposed to the ancestor cult.

results in alienation. The role of African spirituality will be discussed in the next section.

### 3.3 African spirituality

The art of Mbatha is informed by questions that relate to the role of ancestors and holism in the African context. In other words, the inclusion of ancestors gives greater expression to the complexity of the African context and the relationship between ancestors, community and land. This aspect of African spirituality highlights the unique identity of African culture in the wake of colonialism and the stereotypes associated with African spirituality. In other words; the questions that Mbatha introduces gives greater expression to the complexity of the African context and the value of African spirituality. This has an important de-colonial thrust that highlights the contribution of African culture to the interpretation of the Bible by acknowledging the interconnected nature of African spirituality. The rejection of this aspect in the interpretative process ignores an important characteristic of the life force<sup>23</sup> of the African context. This life force is the source of the vitality and vibrancy of communities. Thus, Mbatha's reading may be helpful to avoid reductionism because of its focus on the nature of African spirituality and the complex connection between ancestors, people and land.

Another important contribution of African spirituality is that it also focusses on healing and re-establishes broken relationships (Dube 1996:124). Thus, healing highlights the constructive dimension of African spirituality. According to De Gruchy:

The work of Azaria Mbatha and John Muafangejo, both of whom worked within an African Christian ethos are examples of the art that breaks through the Western dichotomy of the sacred and profane (De Gruchy 2001:235).

In this regard, struggle and faith are not viewed as distinct dimensions in the work of the artist but they are essentially the same.

However, although African spirituality gives greater expression to the complexity of the African context it may succumb to reductionism because the questions raised in the interpretative process can become

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23 Onyewuenyi (1991:40) states: "Existence-in-relation sums up the African conception of life and reality. The African does not separate being from force as its attribute. Rather Africans speak, act and live as if for them beings were forces ... There is the divine force, terrestrial or celestial forces, human forces, and vegetable and other mineral forces"

absolute and exclude others. Thus, interpretation must remain an ongoing process with an openness to reflect on new questions that may arise from the African context.

To conclude, it is clear that the interaction between scholars and non-scholars provides a more encompassing view of reality. The inclusion of the spiritual dimension by Mbatha resists the sway of reductive stereotypes and provides a critique of colonialism. It is important to note that, although this approach is beneficial, the danger of rationalizing the spiritual dimension, as happened in the case of Tutu's use of the word *Ubuntu*, must be averted. To steer clear of this danger it is important to highlight that the interaction between scholarly - and non-scholarly interpretations of the Bible is an ongoing process. In other words, the results of scholarly reflection should continually be tested and shaped by the questions raised by non-scholarly interpreters.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Interpretations of the Tower of Babel narrative by scholars from the African context enrich the understanding of the Bible because of the unique interpretative perspectives that arise from this context. Unfortunately, rationalism, that is pervasive in modern scholarship, is present in African hermeneutics as was seen in the interpretation of Solomon Avotri.

The cultural perspective of Avotri focused on questions relating to the Blue Bird myths. This emphasized the separation between God and humanity and the affirmation of life. The dispersion is viewed as a reality that people need to deal with. This perspective is unique in terms of the general scholarly consensus that the sin of the builders of the tower is hubris. The problem with this perspective is its lack of critical scrutiny of culture and neglect of dealing with ethical issues like sexism. These shortcomings were addressed by the Black African hermeneutic of scholars like Desmond Tutu.

The interpretations of Tutu highlighted the experience of injustice and specifically racism in South Africa. The word *shalom* and the fact that God created people in his image were determining factors in Tutu's interpretation. *Shalom* refers to unity, peace and justice. In this regard, the dispersion is not a biblical imperative for the human co-existence and the structuring of society, but the result of sin. This resulted in the complexity of the holistic African view of reality being rationalized. The result was a view of *shalom* and *Ubuntu* that was Africanized form of the Renaissance and communitarianism.

Rationalism and reductionism are resisted by the interaction between scholarly and non-scholarly interpreters of the text. Non-scholars incorporate the complexity, spirituality and inter-connectedness of the African context in their interpretations. This is reflected in the art of Azaria Mbatha that includes the ancestor cult, although this is not generally part of all forms of African Christianity. Aspects of holism, justice and healing informed the interpretation of Mbatha. The danger of this approach is that the engagement between scholars and non-scholars may become reductionist, absolute and relativistic if the engagement does not stay dynamic and open. In order to avoid this there should be continuous engagement in which scholarly interpretations are challenged by non-scholars and scholars provide critical reflections on texts and the interpretative process.

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